

## **Indian Freedom Struggle**

From modest beginnings, the East India Company gradually became the dominant power in India in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. By 1857, the British ruled the country directly or indirectly (through the hundreds of native princely states).

### **First War of Independence 1857**

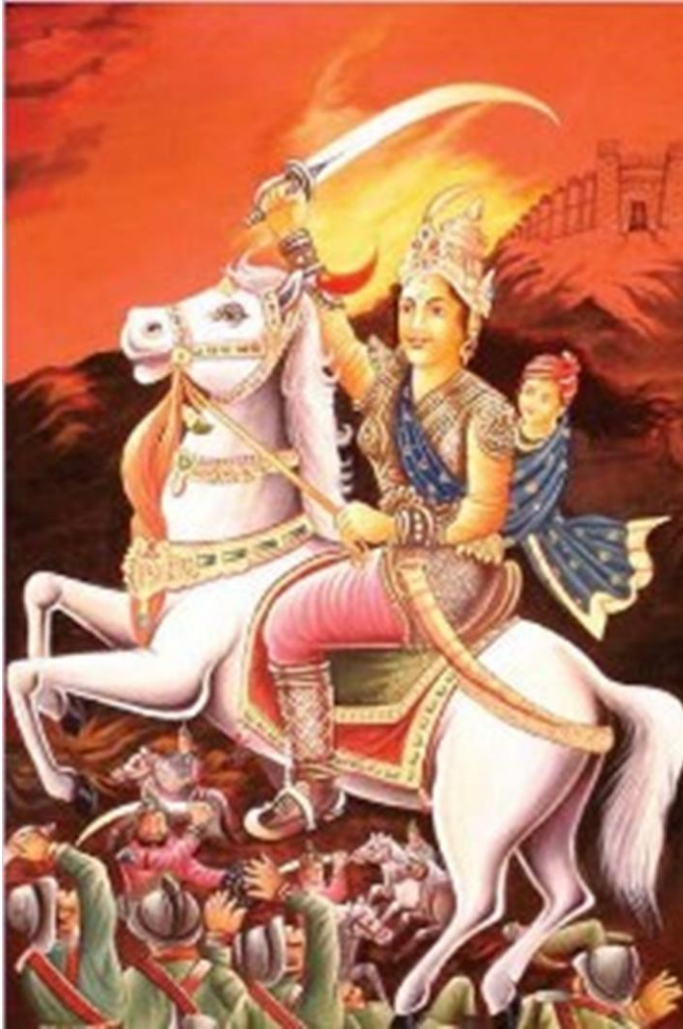
Termed later by V.D. 'Veer' Savarkar as the 'First War of Indian Independence'; but known then as the Indian Revolt of 1857, this series of events occurred as the result of a lot of factors rather than any single event, and was the first major revolt against British colonial power in the Indian subcontinent. Among the many factors that caused this revolt, was a mutiny in sections of the native regiments.

The biggest contributing factor in these mutinies was influenced by religious beliefs of the subcontinent. Sepoys had to bite a cover to remove it from the cartridges used for their rifles while operating them, as they were pre-greased and tighter than earlier muskets. The grease used for this purpose was allegedly derived from beef and pork, which offended the religious sentiments of both the Hindu and the Muslim communities.

The revolt began at Barrackpore (now in Kolkata, and once the oldest British cantonment in India) when Mangal Pandey, a soldier of the 34<sup>th</sup> native infantry, shot and wounded his sergeant. Pandey was subsequently arrested and hanged. But by then it had created a domino effect among the Indian sepoy, and a few weeks later, soldiers in Meerut refused to handle the new guns and cartridges. Many soldiers marched to Delhi to revolt against the policies of the British, and to show their support to the Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah II 'Zafar'.

### **Propagation of the movement**

The then Mughal Emperor, the poet-king Bahadur Shah II (known by his pen-name 'Zafar') was declared the True Emperor of India, or *Shehenshah-e-Hind*. The British had been exerting their power much more now, causing worry to many kingdoms, particularly the Mughals.



*Rani Lakshmi Bai was one of the first to revolt against the British conquest.*

Rani Lakshmi Bai was the widow of Maharaja Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi, and opposed British rule because the East India Company refused to accept her adopted son Damodar Rao as the heir to the throne. Under the controversial 'Doctrine of Lapse' the Company wanted to take over the state of Jhansi and rule it directly. Rani Lakshmi Bai fought alongside her army against the British army but after some resistance, the British recaptured Jhansi and Rani Lakshmi Bai had to flee to

Gwalior with Tantia Tope. Rani Laxmibai died fighting there, and Tantia Tope was betrayed by his generals, and eventually hanged. While the Sepoy mutiny and the efforts of Laxmibai could not end the British stronghold over India, it did mark the first instance when Indian citizens had risen against the British.

In Bihar, Kunwar Singh, the zamindar of Jagdishpur, led the revolt against the British, but died after suffering grievous wounds. The *Begum* of Awadh, Hazrat Mahal, also led the war against Company, but eventually had to flee to Nepal.

### **Effects of this revolt on India**

One of the major results of the revolt was the end of Company rule in India. In 1858, the British parliament passed a law through which the power for governance of India was transferred from the East India Company directly to the British crown. It was known as the Government of India Act, 1858. This meant that now, India was now officially a part of the Commonwealth of England, and came under the rule of the Queen.

The British crown became directly responsible for control of all matters pertaining to India. A Secretary of State was appointed and India became an official British colony. While the East India Company maintained its position in India as a trading agent, the British crown held the direct position of being the ruler of the subcontinent. Thus, the governance of India was done primarily to strengthen the position of Britain in the world.

Farmers were forced to produce crops which were to be sold by British, and Indians were forced to buy British-made goods which were cheaper than Indian goods because of differential systems of taxes and tariffs. In 1877, Queen Victoria was proclaimed the Empress of India. There still were revolts against the colonial rule, but since India was officially a colony of England, the British government would frequently crush all such revolts with brute force, something which was not so common during the time of East India Company.

During this period, many great people tried to revive Indians. RamkrishnaParamhansa (1836-1886), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) led an Indian Renaissance. Swami Vivekananda was the most prominent of them all, and even addressed gatherings across the world in an effort to get more attention towards the injustice Indians were facing under the British.

Swami DayanandSawaswati formed the Arya Samaj, which later became a major religious movement in the northern parts of India. A.O. Hume formed the Indian National Congress, whose first meeting was held in 1885 in Mumbai. Womesh Chandra Banerjee was its first president.



*Swami Dayanand was one of the first people to openly urge Indians to fight against the Raj.*

The British, following their 'divide and rule' policy, divided Bengal into Hindu and Muslim areas, ostensibly to make the task of administration easier, but in actual fact to increase tension between these communities. Lord Curzon was the British Governor of India during this period. Protest meetings against the partition were organized in all parts of the country in 1905.

The partition of Bengal also saw a strong polarisation in Indian National Congress. Moderates such as Gopal Krishan Gokhale believed in making 'loyal' representations to the government for small reforms, while hardliners like 'Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak demanded complete freedom or '*purnaswarajya*'. Tilak gave the slogan "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it" in the newspaper *Kesari*.

The primary leaders of the nationalist movement were Lala Lajpat Rai from Punjab, Bal Gangadhar Tilak from Maharashtra and Bipin Chandra Pal from Bengal. Together, they were called "Lal-Bal-Pal". Ajit Singh and Chidambaram Pillay were other important leaders of the Nationalistic Movement. The Nationalistic movement adopted the slogan of '*Swadeshi*' and '*Swaraj*'.

*Swadeshi* meant that people should give priority to goods made in their own country rather than importing goods from other countries, as this would benefit people of India. *Swaraj* meant that Indian citizens had the right to decide their own rulers, using their own methods. Tilak aimed at *Swarajya* (Independence), not compromising reforms, and attempted to persuade the Congress to adopt his *Purna Swarajya* program. On this issue, he clashed with the moderates at the Congress very frequently, and this led to weakening of the Congress due to internal disputes.

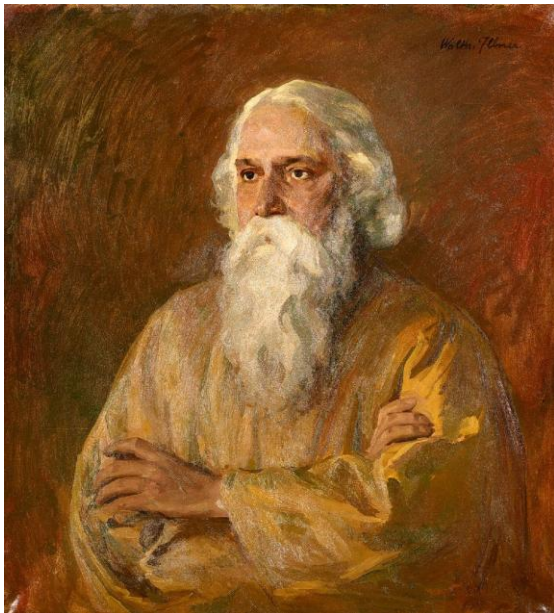
Taking advantage of this, the government prosecuted Tilak on a charge of sedition and inciting terrorism, and banished him to Burma for six years, thus significantly hampering the progress of the Nationalist movement.

### **The Muslim League, and dividing of opinions**

The Muslim League was formed at Dacca in 1906. Although Muslims had a fair representation in Congress, some of them wanted a separate platform for Indian Muslims. The aim of the partition of Bengal was to destroy the peace and harmony Hindus and Muslims shared amongst

one another, and the formation of the Muslim League showed that the British had indeed succeeded in doing so.

The protests against the British government were not something that just the common man did, but even intellectuals, writers and poets now were openly opposing the barbaric rule of the British over the Indian subcontinent. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was one of the many who actively supported the movement. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's '*VandeMataram*' was chosen by the protestors as their patriotic slogan.



*Fondly known as Gurudev, Rabindranath Tagore fought against the British with his prose and poetry, even earning a Nobel for his work.*

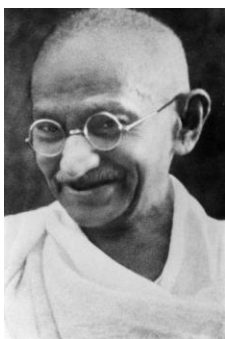
Several revolutionaries like Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki became active at this time, and major events like Alipore Bomb case and Hardinge Bomb case occurred. In 1914, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was released after serving a prison sentence of 6 years. Under the leadership of Tilak, Annie Besant and Subramaniam, the Home Rule League was started.

## Freedom struggle post Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, today referred to as 'Mahatma' Gandhi, was the person who influenced Indian independence movement more than any other individual- either before or after him. This remarkable man had lived in South Africa for almost 20 years, before returning to India aged 45, in 1915. He had already fought against apartheid in South Africa, and was determined to help the Indian cause as well.

In 1916, the two opposite sections of INC united once again, and also got the support of the Muslim League for their campaign for Indian independence. However, the Indian revolt took a backseat during this period as the world was engrossed in the Great War (as World War I was known then).

A large number of Indians served the British army during the war, with more than half a million Indians participating in military activities in Europe. India, along with other British colonies, also had to generate a lot of ammunition and food to supply for the British troops during the war. The First World War ended with Britain and its allies winning the war, but also being economically weakened. This resulted in further taxation on Indian citizens and hardships across India. These were factors that further catalysed the Indian independence movement.



*Fondly known as "Bapu", Mahatma Gandhi preferred non- co-operation, truth and non-violence over the use of force and violence*

## **JallianwalaBagh Massacre and its repercussions**

The British responded to the Indian help in World War I by introducing the Rowlatt Act. This allowed the government to imprison anyone without a trial or a conviction, as it seemed fit. There were widespread protests in opposition to this law, as it curbed fundamental rights of the citizens. On April 13, 1919, thousands of people gathered to peacefully protest against this law in JallianwalaBagh, Amritsar. British troops marched to the park accompanied by an armored vehicle, on which machine guns were mounted. The troops were under the command of the infamous General Dyer, who ordered his men to open fire on the peaceful gathering. Since there was no other exit but the one already manned by the troops, people desperately tried to exit the park by trying to climb the walls of the park. Some people also jumped into a well to escape the bullets. More than a thousand people, including women and children, were massacred. The JallianwalaBagh massacre further enraged Indian citizens, and along with nationwide protests, eventually led to Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, or the Civil Disobedience Movement, against the British in 1920.

It began with returning of honorary titles given by the British to Indian citizens, such as Rabindranath Tagore rejecting the knighthood conferred upon him. People continued to boycott elections and all government works. Foreign clothes were burned and *Khadi* (home woven cloth) became a symbol of freedom, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. By the end of 1921, all of the important leaders, except Mahatma Gandhi were in jail. In February 1922, at ChauriChaura, Uttar Pradesh, violence erupted when people clashed with British troops, resulting in many deaths and injuries. Deeply hurt by what had happened, Mahatma Gandhi forcefully called off the movement. He was then arrested, and the movement ended.



## **Swaraj Party**

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, along with Motilal Nehru, founded the Swaraj Party in 1923 for maintaining continued participation in legislative councils. The party was soon recognized as the parliamentary wing of the Indian National Congress. In Bengal, many of the candidates fielded by the Swaraj Party were elected to office. The party came to be a powerful opposition in the Bengal Legislative Council and inflicted defeats on three ministries. This was the first occasion that representatives chosen by the Indian public held positions of power in the government, and people saw it as a decline of British power.

The Calcutta Municipal Act of 1923 was a major landmark in the history of local self-government in India. The Swarajists were elected to the Calcutta Corporation in a majority in 1924. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das was elected Mayor and Subhas Chandra Bose was appointed Chief Executive Officer.

In 1924, Mahatma Gandhi was released from prison, citing poor health, and was elected President of the Indian National Congress. 1925 was a historic year as for the first time, a woman became the president of Indian National Congress, when Sarojini Naidu was elected President for the Kanpur session.

## **Hindustan Republican Association**

The revolutionaries in northern India organized under the leadership of Ramprasad Bismil, Jogesh Chatterjee, Chandrashekhar Azad and Sachindranath Sanyal, whose '*Bandi Jiwani*' served as a textbook to the revolutionary movement. These were people who thought that only more extreme measures could loosen the stronghold that the British had over India, and chose to fight violence with violence.

They met in Kanpur in October 1924 and founded the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) to organise armed revolution. The most important action of the HRA was the Kakori train episode. On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1925, ten men climbed up the 8-Down train at Kakori, an obscure village near Lucknow, and looted its official railway treasury.

Government reaction was quick and hard. It arrested a large number of young men and tried them for their alleged involvement in this case. Ashfaqullah Khan, Ramprasad Bismil, Roshan Singh, Rajendra Lahiri were hanged, four others were sent to the Andaman for life and seventeen others were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

Chandrashekhar Azad escaped and continued fighting the British independently.

## **Simon Commission and HRSA**

The Simon Commission was appointed by the British Government to suggest political reforms in India in 1927. Sir John Simon and all the other members of the commission were British. This caused great anger in India, the fact that not one of the members was an Indian. The arrival of the Simon Commission led to large-scale protests all over India. The British officials were welcomed in India with massive revolts, with the people chanting the slogan "Simon, Go back!" Bejoy Kumar Sinha, Shiv Varma, Jaidev Kapur, Bhagat Singh, Bhagwati Charan Vohra and Sukhdev in Punjab set out to reorganize the HRA under the overall leadership of Chandrashekhar Azad.

In September 1928, they created a new collective leadership, and adopted socialism as their official goal and changed the name of the party to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HRSA). Meanwhile, Lala Lajpat Rai died as the result of lathi-charge in an anti-Simon Commission protest. Leadership of HRSA saw this as a challenge and in December 1928, Bhagat Singh, Azad and Rajguru assassinated a police official involved in the deadly lathi-charge on Lala Lajpat Rai. Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw a bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly on 8 April 1929 protesting against the passage of the Public Safety Bill and the Trade

Disputes Bill that would reduce the civil liberties of citizens. The aim was not to kill, for the bombs were relatively harmless.



*Martyrs all...*

The leaflet they threw into the Assembly hall bore the words “If the deaf are to hear, the sound has to be very loud”. They were tried in the Assembly Bomb Case. Their slogans 'InquilabZindabad,' and songs such as '*Sarfaroshikitamanna ab hamaredilmeinhain*' and '*Mera rang de basantichola*' became very popular all over India. Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were sentenced to death in the Lahore conspiracy case and were hung to death on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1931.

Chandrashekhara Azad managed to escape yet again, and he continued to organize the revolutionary youths. But on 27th February 1931, Azad was betrayed by an informer and was encircled by a huge posse of British troops in Alfred Park, Allahabad. He was asked to surrender but Azad refused. For several hours, he fought alone against dozens of policemen. He kept on

fighting till the last bullet. Finding no other alternative, except surrender, Azad shot himself.

### **Satyagraha Movement: Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru**

In 1925, Bardoli taluka in Gujarat suffered from floods and famine, causing crop production to suffer and leaving farmers facing great financial troubles. However, the British government raised the tax rate by 22% that year, and despite petitions from civic groups, refused to cancel the rise in the face of the calamities. The situation for the farmers was grave enough that they barely had enough property and crops to pay off the tax, let alone for feeding themselves afterwards. Vallabhbhai Patel urged the farmers not to pay, declaring the hike unjust. He prepared the farmers for Satyagraha.

The Satyagraha continued for six months. Finally, the government agreed to hold an inquiry into the justification of the tax hike, released the satyagrahis and returned all acquired land back to the farmers. It was after this that Vallabhbhai Patel began to be addressed as "Sardar" or leader.

Jawaharlal Nehru, son of congress leader Motilal Nehru, also joined the freedom struggle as a member of the Indian National Congress. In the Lahore session of Congress in 1929, under President Jawaharlal Nehru, the resolution of '*Poorna Swaraj*', or 'complete independence', was adopted. On December 21, 1929, the *Tiranga* (tricolour) flag was unfurled on the banks of the river Ravi. On January 26, 1930, the first Independence Day was celebrated by the Indian National Congress.

The Civil disobedience movement was restarted. Nehru, along with many other prominent leaders, spent most of the period from 1930 to 1936 in jail for conducting civil disobedience campaigns.



*Jawaharlal Nehru*

## **Dandi March**

On March 12, 1930, Mahatma Gandhi marched from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, to protest against the state monopoly on salt, an event that has now gone down in history as the Dandi March. The march was 375 km and took 26 days. As a result of this march, all of India joined the campaign to boycott foreign goods and refused to pay taxes.

With increasing pressure on the British government as a result of Indian revolts and the actions of the INC, the British stronghold on India was loosening. Britain was also engrossed in the Great Depression during the late 1920s, which severely hampered the economic growth of the country. Managing so many colonies along with its own economy, and spending money overseas to regularly curb revolts was seeming harmful, and it was evident that sooner or later, the British government would give in and grant at least partial autonomy to India.

## **Round Table Conferences**

The conferences were held in November 1930, and were attended by eighty-nine delegates from different religious, political groups and princely states. Sardar Patel was released after

the Gandhi-Irwin pact of March 1931. Mahatma Gandhi signed the Pact on behalf of the Congress and Lord Irwin, on behalf of the Government. The terms of the agreement included the immediate release of all political prisoners not convicted for violence, the remission of all fines not yet collected, the return of confiscated lands not yet sold to third parties, and lenient treatment for those government employees who had resigned.

## **Government of India Act 1935**

In 1935, the Government of India Act was passed in the British Parliament. This created an All-Indian Federation based on provincial autonomy. Elections were held in 11 provinces. The Congress swept 7 out of 11 of the provinces in July 1937. The Muslim League, which claimed to represent Indian Muslims, secured less than a quarter of the seats reserved for Muslims.

In 1940, the Muslim League passed a resolution demanding Pakistan after as a separate country after Independence. This was because Muhammad Ali Jinnah was convinced that Muslims in India were under a threat, and they needed their own country to rule themselves by their own laws. This was a direct effect of the 'Divide and Rule' policy of the British.

## **The Quit India Movement, World War II and Indian National Army**

The independence movement was once again hampered because of the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Second World War. Indians were once again forced to fight for the British, and Mahatma Gandhi controversially agreed to support Britain in the war, because he thought that would help in convincing British to grant independence to India.

World War II also had a serious impact on Indian economy. Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Britain during this time, deliberately diverted supplies from Indian cities to maintain British stockpiles in case of emergencies, and India was made to pay a hefty sum due to the

war. Many citizens starved to death in the infamous Bengal Famine, when a large portion of resources was sent to Britain for the Allied forces.

In 1942 The Quit India resolution was adopted in the Bombay session of Congress. Mahatma Gandhi stressed, "We shall either free India or die in the attempt. We shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery". This is when Gandhi gave the clarion call of "Do or Die".

The movement was declared illegal by British government, and all the prominent leaders were arrested. The Indian National Army, led by Subhas Chandra Bose played a major role in the freedom struggle. Subhas Chandra Bose also sought the support of Adolf Hitler in Indian independence, as both of them seemingly shared a common enemy in the form of Great Britain. Bose tried to get Allied Powers involved in the Indian subcontinent to drive away the British, but he died under mysterious circumstances before he could execute his plan.

## **Partition and Independence**

M.A. Jinnah was unwilling to let go of his demands for a separate country for Indian Muslims, despite repeated attempts by Mahatma Gandhi. After a series of talks and plans between all concerned parties, the Muslim League, INC and the British finally agreed for the partition of the country, which was announced on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1947. On 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947 India became an independent country. Jawaharlal Nehru took oath as the first Prime Minister of Independent India, and with the adoption of the Indian constitution in 1950, India officially became a democratic republic.

The independence that Indians enjoy today is not the fruit of the labour of one man, but of an entire nation. It is tough to imagine the state of the subcontinent just a century ago, but it was with the sacrifices of the people that India has emerged from the chains of colonial rule, and it is indeed heartwarming to see India competing with western countries, despite being so much younger than all of them. India faces its share of problems today, but as history has taught us,

the people of this country fought for this country selflessly, and they continue to do so, for the glory of their motherland.